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West of Omaha

A Farce in One Act

By
RACHEL BARTON BUTLER

"Oh, what a tangled web we weave
When first we practice to deceive."

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CHARACTERS

RALPH KNICKERBOCKER, *an artist.*
SHERWOOD AINSLEE, *his friend.*
MR. EPHRAIM STYLES, *Knickerbocker's uncle.*
CHARLIE, *a negro house man.*
MRS. ALEXANDER VAN NEWBERG, *rich and aristocratic.*
ROWENA VAN NEWBERG, *her stepdaughter.*
VIOLET ARNOLD, *her daughter by her first marriage.*

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West of Omaha

SCENE.—RALPH KNICKERBOCKER'S *studio on a morning in early April. A large room, over-furnished with useless articles of artistic value, and under-furnished in such commodities as chairs, tables, etc. At back two windows. To* L. *is a door leading to a public hall. To* R. *a door leading to an inner room. Studio easels, a model's stand, over which are flung a number of pieces of rich draperies. The room hints at luxury pleasingly combined with Bohemian disregard of convention.*

(*At rise of curtain the stage is empty. Presently a knock is heard at door* L. *There is no response. The knock is repeated, loud and long. After a pause,* SHERWOOD AINSLEE *appears from door* R. *He is wrapped in a lounging robe and his hair is tumbled. He yawns profusely as he crosses to door* L.)

SHERWOOD (*around a yawn*). Who's that?

CHARLIE (*without*). Yer's yo' mail, Mistah Sherwood.

SHERWOOD (*yawning*). Ya-a-a—h! Wait a minute, Charlie. (*He opens the door and takes the mail.*) Postman just come?

CHARLIE. Law! Mistah Sherwood, he's been an' gone, long 'go.

SHERWOOD. What time is it?

CHARLIE. Mighty neah on to 'leven 'clock.

SHERWOOD (*unconcernedly*). Is it, indeed? That'll be all, Charlie. Eh? What! A thirst so early in the morning?

CHARLIE (*appearing, leaning against the door jamb*). It's jes' this way, Mistah Sherwood. These spring mo'nings I cutainly feels the need o' a little stimulation, so I jes' takes some whiskey ——

SHERWOOD (*interrupting him*). Here, Charlie (*giving him money from his pocket*), when you begin to argue I'd rather pay the price than to listen to your demonstration.

CHARLIE. Thank yo', Mistah Sherwood, thank yo', sah. Yo' a' cutainly a gen'man, sah.

SHERWOOD. Oh, all right, all right! (*He closes the door; looks over letters.*) Mr. Ralph Knickerbocker, Mr. Ralph Knickerbocker, Ralph Knickerbocker, Esq. Bills, I'll bet! *For* Mr. Ralph Knickerbocker, scented. (*He sniffs it.*) A lady, my dear Ralph?—and "Ralph Knickerbocker," unadorned before or behind. (*With conviction.*) *Uncle Eph!* Hi! Ralph! Ralph! my love! Uncle Eph's ponied up. Here's his little billy-dux along with some little billy-bills which uncle's extra hundred will help pay.

RALPH (*appearing at door* R.). What are you bawling about, my young friend?

SHERWOOD (*waving the last letter*). Uncle Eph!

RALPH. No! Not really?

SHERWOOD. Yep! open her up. Here, before you do it, I'll bet you my last quarter it's for a hundred.

RALPH. I'll not bet a cent till I lay eyes on the check. It's too serious a matter. (*Feeling in his pocket.*) Besides I haven't a quarter, I've only a dime.

SHERWOOD. Well, to it, my boy, open her.

(RALPH *slits the envelope and draws out the contents. He unfolds it, shakes it, looks in the envelope. On his and* SHERWOOD'S *face appears a look of pained surprise. He repeats the entire performance, then shakes his head.*)

RALPH. Nothing doing.

SHERWOOD. Maybe he forgot the check.

RALPH (*dryly*). Yes, I think he did.

SHERWOOD. But will send it later. Read what he says.

RALPH (*reading*). "My dear Nephew: Yours of the second instant received. Feel your allowance must serve you for this month. As regards continuance of said allowance, I feel forced to advise you. You have had unbridled rein for several years for the pursuance of your art, but juries seem to fail to recognize your genius. Your only course, therefore, seems, to me, to be a rich marriage. Apply your allowance to the pursuit of a new mistress and I feel your success is assured. I will assist you to the extent of my ability and can introduce you to several eligible parties. One I have already in mind, and will come to town soon for the purpose of introducing you to her. Beyond using my influence toward your marriage, I

must beg you to not rely upon me for the future. Your very affectionate uncle, Ephraim Styles."

SHERWOOD (*whistling a long, long whistle*). Your very affectionate uncle, Ephraim Styles.

RALPH. Yes, he loves me as the spider does the fly. I call that damnable! Old miser!

SHERWOOD. It gives me a sinking feeling in my tummy, Ralph.

RALPH. That's nothing to what your tummy will feel before the next allowance comes in. Speaking of stomachs, is there anything to eat?

SHERWOOD (*going to a carved cabinet and investigating*). Three dry rolls and some coffee.

RALPH. Ha! eat, drink and be merry, for to-morrow—why, to-morrow—there will be no dry rolls or coffee.

SHERWOOD. And I gave that beggar Charles a dime for "stimulation."

RALPH. Extravagance, my boy, is the root of all hunger. You can buy a dozen rolls for a dime.

SHERWOOD. And two dozen if they're dry.

(*He gets out gas stove, coffee-pot, etc., and proceeds to prepare breakfast.* RALPH *assists spasmodically, finally subsiding into a chair from which he has removed a number of odd articles.*)

RALPH. Uncle Ephraim be—damned! It's an awful thing to be looking matrimony in the eyes.

SHERWOOD. Kind of thought you had impulsive tendencies of your own volition in that direction lately, my boy.

RALPH. It's a very different matter, running your own head into the noose from being *lassoed.*

SHERWOOD. Oh! speaking of the fair unknown, methinks there is an epistle somewhere amongst that mail—pearly pink and scented.

RALPH (*rising impatiently*). Well, why in the name of grass didn't you say so?

SHERWOOD. I'm neither a carrier dove nor Cupid's little messenger, my dear boy. Look out for your own mail.

RALPH (*opening letter; reading*). Oh, Lord!

SHERWOOD. Has she eloped with a handsomer man? That'd be easy enough.

RALPH. Her mother's home from her honeymoon.

SHERWOOD. Whose mother?

RALPH. Violet's.

SHERWOOD. Violet being the adored one?

RALPH. Um—huh! (*Still reads.*)

SHERWOOD. How old is the lady if her mother's young enough for a honeymoon?

RALPH. Never knew there was any age limit as to eligibility for a honeymoon—anyhow, not from a woman's standpoint. Violet's mother, some three months ago, took unto herself a new lord and master—Mr. Van—Van—something. Oh! hang it! I can't remember his name.

SHERWOOD. You have met mamma?

RALPH. Good heavens no! She was on her honeymoon when I met Violet. Violet's been staying with her aunt. And auntie doesn't like *me* a little bit. She has views as to Violet's marriage, and *I'm* not in the perspective. She will probably dress me up in all my impecunious glory to mamma and my troubles of the last three months will seem like money from home compared to what mamma will give me.

SHERWOOD. Please don't say money from home. It makes me lonesome. In the meantime, come to breakfast. The morning repast is laid. Food has a marvelously cheering effect.

RALPH. Food! Yes, but do you call dry rolls food?

SHERWOOD. "A poor thing, but mine own." And what is Violet's news from the front? Has mamma been told your awful name and story?

RALPH. Not yet, but soon. Auntie has been more than usually troublesome and can't hold out long before calling on mamma for reinforcements. And now Uncle Ephraim withdraws even my scanty financial props. Oh! this is lovely!

SHERWOOD. Have some more coffee?

RALPH. More? I've not noticed any yet.

SHERWOOD. You just put down a whole cup.

RALPH. What! that? I took that for my cup of hot water before breakfast.

SHERWOOD. Well, you make the coffee next time if you don't like mine. Open up your other mail. Maybe it'll improve your temper.

RALPH. Not likely. They're all bills.

SHERWOOD. Let me have a look. (*He looks over remaining mail.*) This has a crest on it.

RALPH. If it's not a bill, it's a tailor's advertisement or a new health food. Open it if you want to.

SHERWOOD (*opening and glancing over letter*). Ralph, your fortune's made !

RALPH. If it's gold mines, I'm not buying at present.

SHERWOOD. Stimulate yourself with another roll before I begin.

RALPH. Well, the worst has come so I guess I can bear up under too much joy.

SHERWOOD (*with some excitement*). "Mr. Knickerbocker, Dear Sir: As I am to introduce my younger daughter this winter and am anxious to make her social success as pronounced as possible, I have decided a portrait of her painted by you would make her début unique. I have been charmed by the many pieces of your work I have seen of late, and am willing to pay a large sum, provided you will assure me you will not undertake another débutante this season." (You can assure her of that all right.) "I will call at your studio some time this week hoping to complete the arrangement. Will bring my daughter that we may decide on gown, style of portrait, et cetera. Believe me very cordially, Rebecca Moore Van Newberg." Why, aren't you chortling with joy ?

RALPH. Not at all. It's meant for another man. That's easy. I'm always getting his mail. Now I've got the trouble of remailing it marked "opened by mistake."

SHERWOOD. Ralph, your young temper seems blasted. If you let this chance go by, you—you—deserve to choke on dry rolls the rest of your life !

RALPH. I may be visionary, my dear Sherwood, but even I can't see golden prospects in another man's portrait order.

SHERWOOD. That just shows you're too visionary to see business when it waves under your nose. Why do you let this be another man's order ?

RALPH. What do you mean ?

SHERWOOD. She's got you mixed, but she has *your* address all right, somehow. Well, clinch your bargain before she knows the difference, then paint the portrait and make yourself famous.

RALPH. My dear Sherwood, you're dreaming.

SHERWOOD. No, I'm not. The very letter comes in the same mail with Uncle Ephraim's affectionate ultimatum and Violet's joyful news, and you won't see Providence in a letter like *that*. Good Lord, man ! you remember the story of the darky who prayed "Lord, I don't ask you to send me a chicken. Just tell me where one is, and I'll go get it." Do

you expect your chicken roasted and served for you? (*There is a knock at the door.* SHERWOOD *goes, opens it, takes in card and reads.*) "Mrs. Alexander Van Newberg!" (*There is a short pause.*) By the lord Harry! your chicken *is* served! Is she down-stairs, Charlie?

CHARLIE. Yes, sah.

RALPH. I can't do it, Sherwood. I'm not good at lying.

SHERWOOD. My dear boy, don't underrate your powers. Just try.

RALPH. Well, I'm not a bit keen on the idea.

SHERWOOD. But you'll do it?

RALPH (*still uncertainly*). Well——

SHERWOOD. Show the lady up, Charlie, immediately. (*To* RALPH.) I'm not going to give you time to change your mind.

RALPH. You look like Lady Macbeth! "Infirm of purpose! Give me the daggers." And speaking of Lady Macbeth, are you aware you're still in your lounging robe?

SHERWOOD (*moving, not over fast, toward* R.). True, true! I hasten.

RALPH (*at window, looking down*). The unsuspecting victim alights—she is a silken lady somewhat corpulent—and by George! she has brought the youthful subject with her. Pretty girl, too.

SHERWOOD Well, for heaven's sake, man, you're late giving a fellow a hint. Do I look like receiving youth and beauty? (*He disappears suddenly into room at* R., *then pokes his head out.*) Gather up the coffee-pot, man! We look like a ten cent lunch room.

(RALPH *gathers up remnants of breakfast, cups, coffee-pot, etc., hurriedly.*)

RALPH. Hurry up, my son, I'm not anxious to face the enemy alone. I need you. I am ever one to acknowledge genius, and you'd have been an invaluable assistant to the father of our country whenever he *couldn't* tell a lie.

SHERWOOD (*within room*). I'm going to borrow your blue necktie.

RALPH. Oh! any little thing you fancy! This is your project and I suppose you must dress the part.

MRS. VAN NEWBERG. (*without, at a distance*). The third flight too! dear, dear!

RALPH (*anxiously to* SHERWOOD). Haste ye, nymph! I'm getting stage fright.

SHERWOOD (*within*). Buck up, buck up!

RALPH (*peeping out of door*). Delayed on the landing—I needn't have hurried—I forgot the corpulency.

SHERWOOD. How's the young one at close range?

RALPH (*looking out again*). Can't see her. They're coming on up now. Say, where do I belong when "ladies enter"?

SHERWOOD (*appearing at door*). At the easel, at the easel. "Assume a palette tho' you use it not!" And for heaven's sake look busy. (*He disappears.*)

RALPH. That's asking too much. I'm not an Irving. What keeps you so long?

SHERWOOD. Lost my collar button.

RALPH. What's a collar button to your best friend's nerves? Pin it.

SHERWOOD. Your nerves are all right; what you want's nerve. Take a brace.

RALPH. I'd rather have a bracer.

SHERWOOD. A little stimulation? Are you at the easel?

RALPH. Yes, but I'd rather have you look and see if I make a good picture.

SHERWOOD. I never knew you to, before.

(*A knock at the door.*)

RALPH (*in stage whisper*). Sherwood, Sherwood, they're knocking.

SHERWOOD. Well, go open the door. Are you chained by the leg?

RALPH. How can I make a picture at the easel if I open the door?

SHERWOOD. Well, you'll have to. I can't find that button.

RALPH (*still in stage whisper*). What shall I say?

SHERWOOD. Can't you trust a little to inspiration? Besides you're facing a woman—she'll take five minutes' handicap before *you* have to begin. Hurry up, man, they're waiting.

RALPH. I'll wait till they knock again. They'll take it for the abstraction of genius.

SHERWOOD. They'll take it you don't keep a servant. Hurry up.

(RALPH *goes to door, palette in hand, and opens it. In the*

doorway appear MRS. VAN NEWBERG *and* ROWENA VAN NEWBERG. MRS. VAN N. *is breathless from the climb.*)

MRS. VAN N. A—a—chair—if you please.

RALPH (*supplying it by sweeping one clear of things*). Of course.

MRS. VAN N. (*looking up despairingly*). And a glass—of water.

RALPH. Yes, yes. (*Over to* R. *to get water. To* SHERWOOD, *in inner room.*) Hurry up, Sher, she's a peach.

SHERWOOD (*within*). Damn that button!

RALPH. Pin it, pin it.

SHERWOOD. I've tried, and all I've pinned is my fingers.

RALPH (*taking water to* MRS. VAN N., *at* L. *To* ROWENA). Is there anything else I can do?

ROWENA. Oh, no! Mamma'll be all right. Only it's irritating not to be able to talk even for a few minutes, isn't it, mamma?

MRS. VAN N. (*gasping*). There are times when I wonder if you're as—ingenuous as you look, Rowena.

ROWENA. There now, you see, you're better. You can talk.

MRS. VAN N. (*reviving; to* RALPH). My goodness! Why do you live on the third floor?

RALPH. The view is finer—(*to himself*) and the rent less.

MRS. VAN N. What—is a—view to a flight of stairs, Mr. Knickerbocker?

RALPH. Yes, Mrs. Van Newberg?

MRS. VAN N. Let me present you to my daughter. Rowena, Mr. Knickerbocker.

(SHERWOOD *appears from* R.)

RALPH (*to* SHERWOOD). Sherwood! Thank the Lord! Mrs. Van Newberg, allow me to present my friend Sherwood Ainslee,—Miss Van Newberg—Mr. Ainslee. (*The introductions are acknowledged.* RALPH, *aside to* SHERWOOD.) Pinned?

SHERWOOD (*grumpily*). *Stung!*

MRS. VAN N. Did you receive my note, Mr. Knickerbocker?

RALPH. Yes, indeed, Mrs. Van Newberg. In fact I was just reading it when your card was sent up.

MRS. VAN N. Ah! then you know the purpose of my visit? I trust I'm not too late with *my* débutante. (*Archly.*)

RALPH. Not at all, not at all. In fact she's my first débutante.

MRS. VAN N. Why, I thought you painted Hilda Diemster last year.

RALPH (*seeing his mistake*). Ah! last year—oh, yes! But this year, you know—this year, of course not. Ha! this year—of course not.

MRS. VAN N. (*slightly surprised at his emphasis*). And you understand, Mr. Knickerbocker, I *do* want Rowena's portrait to be your only débutante this season.

RALPH (*very earnestly*). Let me assure you, Mrs. Van Newberg, she will be, she will be my only débutante.

MRS. VAN N. That is good of you, Mr. Knickerbocker, and I shall appreciate it to the fullest extent. Now, do let me see some of your late work.

SHERWOOD (*aside to* RALPH). This time your work's a little *too* "late."

RALPH (*to* MRS. VAN N.). Well, you see, Mrs. Van Newberg, most of my things are out now—on—on exhibition, you know. And it rather strips the studio—as you can see.

MRS. VAN N. Oh! but, Mr. Knickerbocker, anything, any little thing. I am so fond of art!

RALPH (*aside to* SHERWOOD). What *am* I going to do?

SHERWOOD. Get out your old studies and bluff it. When people say they "love art," they don't know a New England rock from a French cathedral.

RALPH. Well, then, Mrs. Van Newberg, I shall have to impose some of my old student work upon you. (*Aside to* SHERWOOD.) Do you think she can stand the nude?

(*They rummage amongst sketches.*)

SHERWOOD. Begin with the still life and make a crescendo. If she can live through your flower studies, she won't know what the nude *is* when she gets to it.

RALPH. Just for that I'll show her all!

SHERWOOD. Well, please do, if I'm to have the daughter left to my tender mercies. I was never embarrassed before in my life, as you can bear witness—but, Ralph, she's a stunner! She strikes me dumb.

RALPH. Still there's no hope it'll be for long. You must pardon me, Mrs. Van Newberg, but these old studies of mine seem to be buried. Ah! here they are.

(MRS. VAN N. *crosses to* RALPH *at* R., *where he has drawn out a large portfolio, filled with various studies in charcoal and color. They look over the portfolio.* SHERWOOD *approaches* ROWENA, *who stands perfectly self-possessed at* L. *His gaze is one of rapt admiration for her profile, which she presents to him. He makes several ineffective efforts to speak, opens his mouth and almost begins, then thinks better of it and closes it, much to* ROWENA'S *evident amusement, as she watches him out of the corner of her eye. Suddenly she turns on him in the midst of one of his struggles, and says merrily.*)

ROWENA. For goodness' sake! say it, Mr. Ainslee. You look as if you'd be so much more comfortable if you did.

SHERWOOD. Comfortable isn't the word. I'd be perfectly happy, if I dared to.

ROWENA (*insinuatingly*). I wouldn't let a dare stand in the way of perfect happiness.

SHERWOOD. Well, then (*earnestly*), you're the most adorable girl I ever saw.

ROWENA (*calmly*). Is that all?

SHERWOOD (*with an entire return to his usual self-assurance*). All! Did you expect a marriage license?

ROWENA. Well, if I'm any judge of perfect assurance, you're capable of even that.

SHERWOOD. By George! I like you.

ROWENA. And I liked you from the first moment I heard you say stung.

SHERWOOD. Did you hear that?

ROWENA. I did. What was the matter?

SHERWOOD. Collar button.

ROWENA. Lost?

SHERWOOD. Um—um.

ROWENA. Too bad. I'm sorry.

SHERWOOD. Do you know, you don't look or seem the least like a débutante.

ROWENA. Thank you, very much.

SHERWOOD. Oh, don't mention it. What for?

ROWENA. For thinking I don't look like a débutante.

SHERWOOD. But you are one.

ROWENA. That's bad enough. But if one is a murderer it's quite superfluous to look like one.

SHERWOOD. Is that the way you feel?

ROWENA. Like a murderer? Well, I feel tendencies.

SHERWOOD. Why?

ROWENA. I'm sent up for two years at hard society work. If I don't marry then ——

SHERWOOD. Oh! let's marry sooner!

ROWENA (*ignoring him*). My term is extended indefinitely, and as for a husband, nothing I've seen so far ——

SHERWOOD. Nothing?

ROWENA. I didn't say no man—presents any possibilities of matrimonial escape.

SHERWOOD (*chuckling delightedly*). I never saw any girl like you.

ROWENA. That's merely because you've never been west of Omaha.

SHERWOOD. And you have?

ROWENA. Ever since I was ten.

SHERWOOD. But why? Your people are New Yorkers.

ROWENA. Oh! I was a spindle-legged, pale little weed, and they sent me West for my health. And there I've grown up. I've slept under the stars and watched snow-capped mountains and ridden!—I ride in the park now, but to what I've been used, it's like feeding sugar-water to a man that wants roast beef. When I heard you say "stung" just now, I could have fallen on your neck.

SHERWOOD. Why didn't you?

ROWENA (*demurely*). Well, there was mamma.

SHERWOOD. She's busy now.

ROWENA (*laughing*). Poor dear mamma! When she saw me first!

SHERWOOD. Saw you first!

ROWENA. Yes, she and dad came West on their wedding journey ——

SHERWOOD. Wedding journey! Am I dreaming?

ROWENA. Oh! I forgot you didn't know. Mamma is my father's wife—and my stepmother. They were married three months ago.

SHERWOOD. I begin to see light.

ROWENA. And, on their wedding journey, they stopped to see me. Mamma threw up her hands in horror at my way of living—and planned this New York campaign. So here I am —woe's me!

SHERWOOD. Are you so very sorry?

ROWENA. Not so sorry as I was yesterday.

SHERWOOD. That isn't fair—when mamma is looking.

ROWENA. Since I've been home, if you could see the men I've met!

SHERWOOD. If I could throttle them!

ROWENA. Oh! it wouldn't be necessary to throttle them. A gentle tap on the head would lay them low. And that's what I've got to dance with, and talk with, and flirt with, for two years. Mr. Ainslee, you must ask me to tea sometimes and let me lasso the teacups and corrall the sugar tongs, or I shall go crazy.

SHERWOOD. Every day—if you will.

(*They continue their conversation.*)

MRS. VAN N. (*who has been looking over studies with* RALPH *and come at last to the nude studies*). It seems to me —Mr. Knickerbocker—if you will pardon my saying so—they have very scanty apparel.

RALPH. Oh! you must understand, Mrs. Van Newberg, these are merely studies from *casts*. The classic Greek, you understand ——

MRS. VAN N. Oh! I see. Casts—oh! all the difference in the world. All these must bring back many happy memories, Mr. Knickerbocker.

RALPH. The happiest days of my life! With a regular allowance—— .

MRS. VAN N. (*ponderously arch*). The happiest days! Now, what domestic difficulties I might create, if I should tell that to your wife.

RALPH (*blankly*). My wife!

MRS. VAN N. Don't look so frightened, or I shall really believe you stand in awe of her. I am hoping to meet her soon. I have always heard of her in such glowing terms from Mrs. Henry Martin. Mrs. Martin tells me she's out of town.

RALPH (*not yet recovered*). Yes—er yes, she's out of town —now. (*Groaning aside.*) A wife. Whose wife?

MRS. VAN N. With her mother?

RALPH (*aside, mopping his brow*). And a mother-in-law! (*Aloud.*) Yes, with her mother.

MRS. VAN N. Have you a portrait of Mrs. Knickerbocker here?

RALPH. Not now, not now, Mrs. Van Newberg. In fact, I haven't painted her yet. I expect to soon, however, soon. (*To* SHERWOOD.) Sherwood, old man, I want you a minute.

(SHERWOOD *is however quite deaf.*)

MRS. VAN N. Then of course you'll paint her with the baby.

RALPH (*loud and startled*). What baby!

MRS. VAN N. Why your baby, Mr. Knickerbocker.

RALPH (*aside*). A baby! (*Aloud.*) Ha! ha! of course, of course, my baby. I was only chaffing, of course, ha! ha! (*Aside.*) Damn Sherwood! (*To* SHERWOOD.) Sher, old man!

MRS. VAN N. (*following him*). Have you a picture of the baby, Mr. Knickerbocker?

RALPH (*firmly*). No, no, Mrs. Van Newberg, I haven't a picture of the baby. It's a great pity, but what must be, must, even to a baby's picture. (*He almost shouts.*) Sherwood!

SHERWOOD (*startled*). What!

RALPH. Mrs. Van Newberg wants you to tell her a number of things, a number of things and—I'd like to speak to you a moment myself. Will you excuse us?

(*To* MRS. VAN N. *and* ROWENA.)

MRS. VAN N. (*crossing to* R.). Certainly. (*To* ROWENA.) Mr. Knickerbocker seems very eccentric.

RALPH (*to* SHERWOOD *at* R., *still mopping his brow*). I'm married.

SHERWOOD. What!

RALPH. I'm married. At least the other Ralph Knickerbocker's married, so I am too.

SHERWOOD. Ralph, the heat's gone to your head.

RALPH. No, it hasn't. Here, you wait a minute. I tell you I'm married, or Mrs. Van Newberg thinks I am, which is worse. I've got a wife and a mother-in-law, and a baby, and put 'em all together, it's too sudden! I'll be in a straight jacket counting my fingers, in a padded cell, if you don't take this family off my hands.

SHERWOOD. What do you want me to do? Kill them off?

RALPH. I wish I could! But we'll have to lie them off. You got me into this, now you can pull me out.

SHERWOOD. Oh, hang it, I've got business of my own.

RALPH. Lying to the daughter. I've had my eye on you.

SHERWOOD. I haven't been lying. I've been telling the truth for the first time in my life.

RALPH. Well, if you don't help me out, I won't do a thing

for you, but cook you up to mamma. I'll give you a past without so respectable an adjunct as a wife. I warn you now! I'm at least a respectable married man.

SHERWOOD. If you're going to give yourself airs on the married line, I'll just cut out. What do you want me to do?

RALPH. Lie, lie, like a man. And for heaven's sake don't leave me alone with the old lady again. When do babies teethe, how soon do they talk, when do they walk? She wants to know everything. I ought to have read up on babies. It's awful to be ignorant on any subject under heaven, when you want to lie. Now's your chance, my boy, to break the record at lying and live up to your reputation for a delicate falsifier. You do it so much more aptly than I do.

SHERWOOD. Just indicate the line these prevarications are to be along. How much does she know?

RALPH (*despairingly*). Everything! She can give me cards and spades on babies!

SHERWOOD. Oh, shut up, for heaven's sake! I mean, has she met your wife?

RALPH. Please, please don't you say "your wife" that way. It makes me almost believe it's true.

SHERWOOD. You're mighty particular, it seems to me. Has she met the lady she *thinks* is your wife?

RALPH. Not yet.

SHERWOOD. Has she seen the baby or a picture of it?

RALPH. Don't think so.

SHERWOOD. Does she know your mother-in-law? (RALPH *begins to protest.*) Well, then, *the* mother-in-law.

RALPH. No, I don't think she does.

SHERWOOD. Why, man, that's easy. She's a mere infant in your hands. Call the lady "my wife," and the mother-in-law "my wife's mother," the baby we'll have a girl; name Ethel, age three years. The little beggar ought to be over teething by that time. Have you got those facts fixed in your mind, you gibbering idiot? Please don't diverge from those simple statements without notifying me. And now "back to the ladies." Probably they're thinking we're planning a modern hold-up, we've taken so long.

RALPH (*clutching* SHERWOOD'S *coat-tail*). Sherwood, don't you leave me, or I'll cook your goose with the old lady.

SHERWOOD. Oh! come along. (*To* MRS. VAN N.) Sorry to have been so long, Mrs. Van Newberg, but Ralph and I have been talking over the portrait.

RALPH (*catching at the idea as a drowning man at a straw*). Yes, the portrait. Let's talk of the portrait. The portrait's the thing. (*Laughs uneasily.*)

SHERWOOD (*in an undertone, aside*). Cut it, cut it. Keep cool. (*Aloud.*) Now if Miss Van Newberg will permit us, we're going to make a little analytical study of her charms, to gauge backgrounds and colors and so on. A portrait ought to be merely a setting for the individual, so the very colors must throw out and enhance the figure. Ralph, go get some of those draperies from the other room.

RALPH (*gazing helplessly*). Draperies?

SHERWOOD (*taking him firmly by the arm, in an undertone*). Go—into—the—other—room—and—on—your—left—in—the—cupboard—get—silk—draperies—and—bring—them—here. See! Also fix up the room. That portière is a mere nothing to such eyes as Mrs. Van Newberg's.

RALPH. Oh, oh—all right! [*Goes out* R.

MRS. VAN N. Mr. Knickerbocker doesn't seem entirely well.

SHERWOOD (*easily*). Well, he's just a little out of form, it's true.

MRS. VAN N. No bad news from Mrs. Knickerbocker, I hope.

SHERWOOD (*with assurance*). Oh, no, no, not for a minute.

MRS. VAN N. Or the baby?

SHERWOOD. Oh, not for a moment. No, indeed! There's nothing the matter with *her*.

MRS. VAN N. Why, I thought the baby was a boy.

SHERWOOD. Did I say her? Now isn't that funny? Shows my weakness for the opposite sex. I meant him, of course.

MRS. VAN N. How old is he, did you say?

SHERWOOD (*with firmness*). Three years old.

MRS. VAN N. Three! Then Mr. Knickerbocker has two babies?

(RALPH *has just appeared at the door in time to catch* MRS. VAN N.'S *last speech. He disappears precipitately into the inner room.*)

SHERWOOD. No, no! Only one. (*Aside.*) I wouldn't dare face him with another one.

MRS. VAN N. Why, Mrs. Martin spoke of the baby just beginning to walk and talk.

SHERWOOD. Of course, I meant three months, three *months*, Mrs. Van Newberg.

MRS. VAN N. Walking and talking at three months! Oh, Mr. Ainslee!

RALPH *enters cautiously from* R.

ROWENA (*laughing*). I fear you don't know much about babies, Mr. Ainslee. You seem awfully rusty on the subject.

RALPH (*who catches* ROWENA'S *speech*). Ha! ha! ha! ha! I say, Sher, that is a good one. Now isn't this "easy"? Ha! ha!

SHERWOOD. Well, since you're the father of this interesting young person, perhaps you'll tell Mrs. Van Newberg how old he is.

RALPH. He! (*In a whisper to* SHERWOOD.) Is it a boy? (SHERWOOD *nods icily.*) Why, he is three —— (SHERWOOD *coughs violently.* RALPH *begins to see his mistake.*) Now, you must guess, Mrs. Van Newberg. Just for fun, you guess.

MRS. VAN N. Oh, that's not hard. If he's walking and talking ——

RALPH (*to* SHERWOOD). He's walking and talking ——

SHERWOOD (*disgustedly*). Well, of *course* he is.

MRS. VAN N. I should say he was just about—a year.

RALPH. Now, isn't that funny? He is *just exactly* a year. It's wonderful the way women guess. (*Hastily.*) Here are the draperies, old man. I'm more than anxious to talk over this portrait. Now, if you will sit here, Miss Van Newberg. Shall we try this dull yellow for a background?

MRS. VAN N. What do you think of a profile, Mr. Knickerbocker?

(*They stand at* R.)

RALPH. We'll try it.

SHERWOOD (*at* L., *pointedly to* ROWENA). The trouble with a profile is one loses the glory of the eyes and the perfect chiseling of the lips.

ROWENA (*to him*). I was not wrong in my estimate of your assurance.

SHERWOOD. Even though I were a less assured man I should have to admit all I have.

ROWENA. To yourself perhaps—but not necessarily to the subject.

MRS. VAN N. Will you try that violet piece, Mr. Ainslee?

ROWENA (*to* SHERWOOD, *as he changes the drapery*). I wouldn't mind a lasso effect myself, with a sage grass background.

MRS. VAN N. No, I don't like it. (*Considers new drapery. From without is heard the clang of approaching fire apparatus.* ROWENA *jumps up and goes to window, back.*) Rowena!

ROWENA (*looking out*). They're going right by here! Oh, I do so love fire engines. You see I come from the country and they're a delicious novelty. They're stopping at the corner. The fire must be just across the street. We could see it from in there. Oh! Mr. Ainslee, may I go into the other room?

MRS. VAN N. Rowena!

SHERWOOD (*pointedly*). Ralph, may she go into the other room?

RALPH. Oh, yes, yes, it's all right. I—er—straightened it up.

SHERWOOD. A-hem.

(ROWENA, *without further ado, followed by* MRS. VAN N. *and* SHERWOOD, *disappears into the inner room.*)

RALPH. Thank all the gods of fire, for a moment's respite. May it take long to burn, whatever it is! (*There is a knock at the door, a soft but perfectly audible knock.* RALPH, *wearily.*) Either more mail or more trouble. (*He goes to door* L. *and opens it. In the doorway* VIOLET ARNOLD *appears. She is a slight girl delicately built, sensitive and not so self-confident as the younger but more positive* ROWENA. *Her voice is low, her hair soft, and altogether she is delicately feminine.* RALPH, *aghast.*) Violet! By all that's gracious, where did you fall from?

VIOLET. What a greeting for a lover! Aren't you glad to see me?

RALPH (*anxiously*). What's happened? I know only something serious would bring you here.

VIOLET (*enjoying his suspense*). Mayn't I pay you a morning call just for diversion?

RALPH. Why, Violet, there isn't exactly any harm in it, but—but—well, hang it, it's not quite proper for a girl to call on a man in bachelor quarters, you know.

VIOLET. But this is your studio.

RALPH. Yes, but it's my apartment, too, all right. I'm sorry, Vi, but I can't let you in.

VIOLET (*with mock sadness*). You won't let me in?

RALPH. No, dear. You must see the reason. Now go quick, like a good girl, for there're people in the other room I don't care to have see you here.

VIOLET. Oh! that's the reason it isn't "proper" for me to come in, I suppose. Now, I won't go till I know who they are. It's another girl. I know it's another girl.

RALPH. Yes, it is another girl ——

VIOLET. Ah, ha!

RALPH. But she's properly chaperoned.

VIOLET. Oh, it's quite likely ——

RALPH. Well, she is, whether you believe it or not, so for goodness' sake, go, before they see you. They must be coming back any moment now.

VIOLET. Well, what if they do? I've a good reason for being here. I have an appointment.

RALPH. An appointment!

VIOLET. With my mother.

RALPH (*wildly*). But why bring your mother here, and to-day? I've had enough to bear—mothers-in-law, wives, babies, and now another mother. Violet, intercept her, throw yourself under her horse's feet, but don't bring her here to-day. Go, please go, if you love me, before those people descend on us from the other room.

VIOLET (*a little stubborn*). I don't see why I mayn't know who they are. I'll tell them I'm waiting for my mother. That's perfectly proper.

RALPH. But girls are always waiting for their mothers. It won't do; you must go, Violet.

(*He starts to close the door.*)

VIOLET (*exasperated*). Don't you dare to close that door.

RALPH. But they're coming, dear.

VIOLET. I don't care if they are—don't you close that door. (RALPH *in a panic of indecision stands helpless.* VIOLET *catches a glimpse of the others entering the room from* R.) Why, it's mother and Rowena! Why didn't you tell me at the first? It seems to me this is a little more than a good joke. (*She sweeps past him into the room as* MRS. VAN N., ROWENA *and* SHERWOOD *enter from* R. *To* MRS. VAN N.) I have been detained, mother. I hope I haven't kept you waiting?

RALPH (*as the situation dawns on him*). Her mother!

(*He is struck dumb.*)

MRS. VAN N. Violet, this is Mr. Knickerbocker. This is my daughter, Violet Arnold, Mr. Knickerbocker. And Mr. Ainslee, Violet. (VIOLET *acknowledges the introductions icily to* RALPH, *who is still staggered by the suddenness of the blow.*) No, you're not late. We were early. We got through our shopping sooner than we expected. We've made a start toward the portrait. You were right, dear. Mr. Knickerbocker will undertake it gladly.

RALPH (*hoping to allay the wrath*). Oh, gladly, Vi,—Miss Arnold.

VIOLET (*icily*). Delighted, I'm sure.

(*The door at* L. *during this scene has been left open.* CHARLIE *now appears in it. He coughs deprecatingly to attract* RALPH'S *attention.*)

CHARLIE (*somewhat louder*). A-hem! Mistah Knickerbocker, a-hem!

RALPH (*turning and seeing*). Well, Charlie, what is it? What is it? (*Impatiently.*)

CHARLIE. A telegram, Mistah Knickerbocker. That lazy no 'count watamelon seed of a boy sez he don't walk up no three flight stahs, no siree. So ma po' ol' laigs got a bring huh up. (RALPH *tears open telegram and reads;* CHARLIE *rambles on to him.*) Yo' certainly looks troubled, Mistah Knickerbocker; I knows what's de mattah. Women! When women finds yo', peace goes out the do'. Dat's what I said when I sees 'em comin' heah this mo'ning. De Good Book sez it wuz the woman the sarpent tempted, co's he knew mighty well, if he cu'd get huh started once, she cu'd mek mo' trouble'n he evah thought o'. Woman ——

RALPH (*who has been reading the telegram distractedly, reaches in his pocket and brings out a dime*). Here, Charlie, here's my last dime, but take it and cut. It's cheap at the price, and now for heaven's sake, *go!*

CHARLIE (*pocketing money*). Po' Mr. Knickerbocker. The women's got him. But I don't bear no ha'd feeling 'gainst a gen'man in trouble.

(*Jingling the dime in his pocket he goes out* L.)

RALPH (*looking at his watch*). Just five minutes to make it! (*To the others.*) I'm awfully sorry, but this is a telegram from my uncle, asking me to meet him. The train is due in five minutes. Will you excuse me? He is—er—eccentric and

might not understand my not appearing, or I would not go. I'll be back in a moment, as soon as I can settle him in a near-by hotel. May I ask you to wait, Mrs. Van Newberg?

MRS. VAN N. Why, of course, Mr. Knickerbocker, go. I think Mr. Ainslee can manage three women.

ROWENA. Undoubtedly.

SHERWOOD. Thank you.

RALPH (*hat in hand*). Modesty forbids his saying so, but he considers himself much more capable of managing them than I am.

(*He disappears quickly, out* L.)

SHERWOOD. That sounds very much like a challenge, doesn't it?

ROWENA (*mischievously*). Yours is merely the arrogance of the unmarried man, Mr. Ainslee, who is sure he could manage a woman on the principle that every one can master a grief, but he that has it. I am not for trusting your own estimate of yourself—as witness your downfall in "baby talk."

MRS. VAN N. Yes, Mr. Ainslee, Mr. Knickerbocker had you there!

ROWENA. And you will probably find when you get you a wife, that your theories are as far afield as your ideas of babies.

SHERWOOD. I would risk the experiment, Mrs. Van Newberg.

MRS. VAN N. Yes, Mr. Ainslee, wait till you're married like Mr. Knickerbocker.

VIOLET (*aghast*). Married—like Mr. Knickerbocker!

MRS. VAN N. Yes, Mr. Knickerbocker has been married for several years.

VIOLET. Several—years! Oh, that's impossible!

MRS. VAN N. Why?

VIOLET. I have always understood Mr. Knickerbocker was —unmarried.

MRS. VAN N. My dear, how could you? His wife is at present out of town with the baby, visiting her mother. I'm right, am I not, Mr. Ainslee?

SHERWOOD (*not quite sure of his ground, but determined to stand by* RALPH). Yes, oh, yes.

MRS. VAN N. The baby is exactly a year old and walks and talks—my dear, you are ill? (*To* VIOLET.)

VIOLET. No, no. I am quite well. But I'm interested in Mr. Knickerbocker's family. Tell me more.

MRS. VAN N. Mr. Knickerbocker has no portrait of his wife, but expects to paint her soon with the baby—he has no baby picture,—but ——

(CHARLIE *reappears at the door*, L.)

CHARLIE. Mr. Ainslee, dah's an ol' gen'man down-stahs askin' fo' Mistah Knickerbocker. He's settin' on the bottom step of the first rise of stahs an' he sez he ain't goin' to take chances dat Mr. Knickerbocker don't live heah. You'll have to come down, sah, if you spect him to come up.

SHERWOOD. Who is he, Charlie?

CHARLIE. Sez his name's Styles.

SHERWOOD. Uncle Ephraim! Good Lord! Ralph must have missed him. Charlie, I can't have him up here. If Uncle Ephraim gets a sniff of this matrimonial affair—what am I going to do, Charlie, man to man?

CHARLIE. Wall, Mistah Ainslee, Ah might throw the ol' gen'man out'n to the street, if you say. But it'd cost somepin.

SHERWOOD. Cost something! Well I guess so. It'd cost Ralph almost a neat million. Uncle Eph's more valuable than he looks. Tell him Mr. Knickerbocker isn't in, Charlie, and let him sit there till he comes back. I've got my hands full as it is.

CHARLIE (*shaking his head*). Women, Mistah Ainslee, the root of all evil. Dah a bad lot, all o' 'em. (*He starts out door*, L.) Wall, Mistah Sherwood, I'll jes' tell the ol' gen'man ——

MR. EPHRAIM STYLES (*without*). Well, my good man, what will you tell the old gentleman?

SHERWOOD (*groaning*). He's come up anyhow.

CHARLIE (*sliding around* MR. S. *as he enters*). Ah, ah—was jes' saying—yas, dat's jes' what I wuz saying.

(*He disappears hastily.*)

MR. S. (*to* SHERWOOD). This is Ralph Knickerbocker's studio?

SHERWOOD. Yes. Is this Uncle Eph,—er, Mr. Styles?

MR. S. That is my name, young man.

SHERWOOD. Ainslee, Sherwood Ainslee.

MR. S. (*abruptly*). What?

SHERWOOD (*slightly irritated*). That's my name, sir, Sherwood Ainslee.

MR. S. Don't trouble yourself to speak so loud; I'm not deaf.

SHERWOOD (*with venom*). I'm sorry!

MR. S. Eh?

SHERWOOD. Sorry to have spoken so loud.

MR. S. (*suspiciously*). Oh! May I inquire where my nephew may be?

SHERWOOD. Gone to meet you according to your telegram.

MR. S. Late, I suppose, late as usual. Never does anything on time.

SHERWOOD. He's probably looking everywhere for you. Don't you think you really ought to relieve his mind of anxiety? (*He attempts to gently waft* MR. S. *toward the door.*) You won't stay and wait for him, will you?

MR. S. That is precisely my intention, young man.

(*He seats himself firmly at* L.)

SHERWOOD (*dispassionately, under his breath*). Damn! (*To* MR. S.) You won't meet the ladies, I suppose?

MR. S. You rush to remarkable conclusions, young man. You may introduce the females.

SHERWOOD. Females! (*Crossing to the women at* R.) Mrs. Van Newberg, may I present Mr. Knickerbocker's uncle, Mr. Styles, to you and your daughters?

MRS. VAN N. Delighted, I'm sure. Mr. Knickerbocker's uncle, or his wife?

SHERWOOD (*desperately*). Mr. Knickerbocker's uncle. And, and—Mr. Styles—doesn't approve of Ralph's wife, Mrs. Van Newberg, so if you will consider his feelings and not mention the lady ——

MRS. VAN N. Oh, Mr. Ainslee, not a family skeleton already!

SHERWOOD (*shaking his head sadly*). Yes, Mrs. Van Newberg, I fear so. (*They cross to* C.)

SHERWOOD. Mrs. Van Newberg, let me present Mr. Styles —Miss Arnold, Mr. Styles,—Miss Van Newburg, Mr. Styles.

(*The introductions are acknowledged.*)

MRS. VAN N. (*to* MR. S.). You have a lovely morning for your arrival in town, Mr. Styles.

MR. S. Not to my way of thinking. These idiots that turn off the heat the first of April—April fools, April fools!

(*He turns up his coat collar.*)

MRS. VAN N. You feel the cold?

MR. S. Feel, madam, feel is not the word. Any one can feel cold—*I suffer* from it, agonize in it!

MRS. VAN N. Now, I am just that way about the heat ——

SHERWOOD. Oh, safe and neutral ground—the weather!

(*He goes to* MRS. VAN N. *and* MR. S. *at* L.)

VIOLET (*to* ROWENA, *at* R.). Rowena!

ROWENA. Yes!

VIOLET. Are you sure Mr. Knickerbocker is married?

ROWENA. Well, there doesn't seem much room for doubt. Mamma has known for a long time of his wife from some Mrs. Henry Martin, and he himself has spoken of her and his baby a number of times to-day. Why are you so interested in him?

VIOLET (*with a burst of pent-up feeling*). Why! Why! Because for three months he's made love to me, that's why. Because I have considered myself engaged to him, that's why —— (*Her voice catches and tears seem imminent.*)

ROWENA (*keeping a wary eye on the group at* L.). Vi, for goodness' sake! Don't cry here. I—I can't believe it. Mr. Knickerbocker don't look like that kind of a man. There must be some mistake.

VIOLET. No, there isn't. When I came to-day, he seemed embarrassed,—didn't want me to come in,—didn't think it was "proper," when all the time you and mother were here, and he knew it!

ROWENA. When did you meet him?

VIOLET. Just after mother was married.

ROWENA. Then he'd never seen mamma?

VIOLET. No.

ROWENA. Well, very likely he didn't know her to-day, when we did come.

VIOLET. All the more reason he felt safe to speak of his wife and baby. I hate him—and I hate myself and I hate everybody. (*She goes up* R.; SHERWOOD *joins* ROWENA.)

ROWENA (*to him*). Oh, dear! I wish I were out West again.

SHERWOOD. Why? now?

ROWENA. Because marriage and giving in marriage seems simpler out there!

SHERWOOD. Thinking of Dakota?

ROWENA. Dakota has nothing to do with marriage, Mr. Ainslee. Its only occupation is divorce.

SHERWOOD. Then I am right, for I'll warrant every Dakota divorce produces two marriages.

ROWENA. That's not what I meant when I said marriage was simpler in the West. But it is.

SHERWOOD. If it is, let's leave by the next train.

MRS. VAN N. (*to* MR. S.). Violet is my own daughter, Mr. Styles, and Rowena my stepdaughter. My first husband was Colonel Endicott Arnold.

MR. S. (*astounded*). Endicott Arnold! On my soul! a most remarkable coincidence! Endicott Arnold.

MRS. VAN N. (*slightly alarmed*). Ye-es, Mr. Styles.

MR. S. Why, madam, your husband and I were boys together. Boys! A most remarkable coincidence! Yes, indeed, I knew your husband well. It's most remarkable that here in my nephew's studio I should meet his wife and daughter.

MRS. VAN N. It is indeed, Mr. Styles.

MR. S. You may well say it is—but the most remarkable part you've not heard, not heard.

MRS. VAN N. Indeed?

MR. S. I have come to town expressly to look up your daughter—my old friend Endicott Arnold's daughter.

MRS. VAN N. Really, Mr. Styles!

MR. S. I am a blunt man, madam, and a determined man, also. I have for some time seen the need of laying down definite lines for my nephew. And when I heard from mutual friends that Endicott Arnold's daughter was grown and eligible, I decided to come directly to town and arrange a marriage between this girl and my nephew. I am a blunt man and a determined man, Mrs. Van Newberg.

MRS. VAN N. (*taken aback*). My dear Mr. Styles, not even a determined man can annul a marriage.

MR. S. I have no need of annulling a marriage, my dear madam, I am going to make one.

MRS. VAN N. But, my dear Mr. Styles, if your nephew is already supplied with a wife ——

MR. S. What!

MRS. VAN N. You may not like her, nevertheless she is his wife.

MR. S. (*sputtering*). My nephew—a wife—married! What do you mean, madam?

MRS. VAN N. Just what I say—Mr. Ainslee told me you did not like her; but you cannot ignore her, Mr. Styles.

MR S. My nephew, married! By heavens, madam, what does he mean—what does he mean, I say?

MRS. VAN N. My dear Mr. Styles—I'm sure I don't know. You'll have to ask Mr. Ainslee.

MR. S. (*crossing to* SHERWOOD). My nephew—married—married! Is he, sir, is he, sir, is he?

SHERWOOD (*hastily*). No, no, no!

MRS. VAN N. Mr. Ainslee, you mean to say he is not married?

SHERWOOD (*gathering himself together*). No, no, no!

VIOLET (*coming forward*). Is he married or isn't he, Mr. Ainslee?

SHERWOOD (*giving a despairing glance around the group*). I don't know! (*He bolts to door* L., *and disappears.*)

MRS. VAN N. I shall most certainly await Mr. Knickerbocker's return. There is something more than a skeleton here.

(*She seats herself.*)

MR. S. Pray do, madam. Needless to say I shall await his return.

(*He seats himself slightly above* MRS. VAN N. *and in a line with her at* R. VIOLET *silently but significantly puts a chair above* MR. S.'S, *preserving the direct line.*)

ROWENA (*taking in the phalanx thus ranged against* RALPH'S *return*). I think I ought to do scout duty and warn Mr. Knickerbocker of the ambush. (*She starts out* L.)

MRS. VAN N. Rowena!

ROWENA. Yes, mamma.

MRS. VAN N. Please be seated.

(ROWENA *returns to door* R. *and seats herself opposite the array, plainly indicating her sympathy with the enemy. They wait in silence, the storm gathering force in each of the offended trio.* MR. S.'S *jaw gets grimmer and more set,* VIOLET'S *handkerchief comes now and then into play only to be determinedly rammed back into its abiding place, as anger gets the better of tears.* MRS. VAN N. *is calmer than these, but no less determined to fathom the mystery.* ROWENA *is divided between a desire to shake them all and an almost incontrollable inclination to laugh.*

The silence grows thick and oppressive. Finally it is broken by the sound off L. *of an even tread ascending the steps. The waiters grow more alert. Their gaze turns toward the door.*)

ROWENA (*under her breath*). The victim approaches. Br-r-r! What an array! (*With a glance at the line* R.)

RALPH *enters from* L., *opening and closing the door. He has regained some of his jauntiness. As he closes the door, he says before looking well into the room.*

RALPH. Missed Uncle Eph altogether. Don't know what he'll think of me!

MR. S. (*grimly*). He is about to tell you, sir!

RALPH (*turning at his voice*). Uncle Ephraim! I looked everywhere for you. I never dreamed you'd come here.

MR. S. I can well believe that, sir. And practicing upon my seeming innocence and trusting I would not descend on you, you have lived, sir, a double life. (*Rises excitedly.*) Who is your wife? What is your wife?

RALPH (*desperately, taking the bull by the horns*). I haven't any wife.

ROWENA. Ah!

MRS. VAN N. You haven't any wife?

RALPH. No!

MR. S. You haven't any wife?

RALPH. No!

VIOLET. You haven't any wife?

RALPH. No!

ROWENA. Of course you haven't!

RALPH (*to her*). Thank you for that.

MR. S. Pooh, sir! Pooh, sir! Do you take us for children, that you expect us to believe the first lie you choose to tell? You have admitted to these ladies, your friend has admitted under pressure to me, that you have a wife, sir, that you're married, sir. Don't deny it, there's no use for denial.

RALPH. Very well, sir, I won't deny it. But look for her, search for her, produce her, and I will acknowledge her if you can find her. I adopted a wife because Mrs. Van Newberg thrust her on me. I didn't want a wife—I never want a wife ——

VIOLET (*in an undertone*). Ralph!

RALPH (*waxing warmer*). No, I don't. Mrs. Van New-

berg took me for another fellow, and I let her go on thinking so. That's the whole of it. It's his wife, not mine; his baby, not mine; his mother-in-law, thank heaven, not mine. There, that's the truth. You can take it or leave it.

(*He flings himself into a chair.*)

MR. S. A likely story, sir, a likely story.

ROWENA. I think it is a likely story.

MRS. VAN N. Rowena!

ROWENA. Well, I do.

MRS. VAN N. A likely story, indeed. I am not so easily deceived.

SHERWOOD *enters from* L. *He goes to left of* ROWENA.

SHERWOOD (*to her*). The worst has come?

ROWENA. Mr. Knickerbocker has told the truth. Naturally no one believes him. It's asking too much.

MR. S. Prove it, prove it, sir.

RALPH. I can't prove it; you've got to take my bare word.

MR. S. Your "bare word," sir? Your *thread* bare word.

(CHARLIE *appears in doorway.*)

CHARLIE. Mistah Sherwood, heah's a lettah come by special messenger. He's waitin' an answer. Poh Mistah Knickerbocker! (*He waits.*)

SHERWOOD (*taking letter and reading address*). Ralph Knickerbocker, Esq. (*To* RALPH.) Here, man, you've got to answer it.

RALPH (*wearily*). Open it for me, please, Sherwood.

SHERWOOD (*opening it and reading*). By George! Here's your alibi. "Mr. Knickerbocker, Esq., Dear Sir: May I trouble you to let me know by messenger if a note intended for me was miscarried to you? The note is from Mrs. Alexander Van Newberg concerning a portrait of her daughter to be painted by me. Mrs. Henry Martin has been at my studio all morning awaiting Mrs. Van Newberg, whom she was sure was to call on me this morning. Awaiting your reply, I am yours very truly, Ralph H. Knickerbocker."

(*He hands the note to* MRS. VAN N.)

MRS. VAN N. (*with dignity*). Please send word by the

messenger that I shall be with Mr. Knickerbocker at once. Violet, Rowena.

(*She sweeps toward the door. The girls follow her lingeringly.*)

MR. S. One moment, if you please, madam. If we settle up a little matter here and now, it will save me another day in town. Young lady, I have already indicated to your mother, for reasons of my old friendship for your father, my wish that you marry my nephew. Ralph, what have you to say, sir?

RALPH (*evasively*). It seems manners to me, sir, to hear first from the lady.

MR. S. Well, my dear? He'll be rich, I can assure you.

VIOLET (*to* RALPH). Will you take me after all this?

RALPH (*holding out his arms*). With both arms!

(*She runs into them.*)

MRS. VAN N. (*aghast*). Violet!

SHERWOOD (*to* ROWENA; *aside*). Will you take me?

ROWENA. Yes, when mamma isn't looking.

(*He snatches her hands and kisses them. At this moment* MRS. VAN N. *turns and sees them.*)

MRS. VAN N. Rowena!

(*She sinks limply into a chair, and as they rush to revive her the curtain descends quickly.*)

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